

A PASSAGE THROUGH TIME

Bazaar meets the chief curator and deputy director of an extraordinary museum collection that's shedding new light on the ancient Middle East

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ucked away on the University of Chicago's historic campus is an archaeological museum like no other in the United States; one whose links to Egypt, Iran, Iraq and Syria stretch back over a hundred years. Although this surprising gem houses some 350,000 artefacts chronicling the art and culture of the ancient Middle East, the Oriental Institute has remained something of a best-kept secret amongst archaeologists and scholars. But this year, its insider status is about to change as it embarks on a series of events to mark the centenary of its birth.

"When James Henry Breasted founded the OI in 1919, it was a very radical idea at a time when Western scholars looked to Greece and Rome for the origins of human civilisation. He believed that who we are today can be traced back to the ancient Middle East, a region he named the Fertile Crescent," says Jean Evans, while seated in her light-filled ►

Jean Evans, in a dress and shawl by Anke Loh, walks past a spectacular relief from the palace of King Sargon II of Assyria in northern Iraq



The curator in the museum's lecture hall, in front of a portrait of James Henry Breasted, who founded the OI in 1919

office. Since taking up a dual role as chief curator and deputy director in 2016, Jean has quietly expanded the museum's vision beyond its jewel-box proportions.

At around 1,500 square metres, it's a fraction of the size of other prominent institutions. Yet each year thousands of visitors walk through its galleries, which are housed in an Art Deco and Gothic Revival building completed in 1931. Hanging along the hallways of its upper floor are photographs of men and women, taken during a century's worth of archaeological digs. Among them are Robert and Linda Braidwood, the husband and wife team who conducted some of the OI's excavations in the 1940s. "There's a lot happening behind the scenes here that visitors may not be aware of," says Jean a few minutes later, as she opens the door to the OI's spectacular research library.

"Although the museum has sponsored archaeological digs in the Middle East, we're also an academic institution that brings together experts in Mesopotamian, Levantine, Iranian, Egyptian and Nubian archaeology under one roof," says the curator, while looking up at the library's elaborately painted ceiling and soaring gothic windows. Lining the shelves around her is a priceless collection of books and documents

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findings from his digs at Nippur in Iraq. "Most of his research and paperwork had been sent back to the OI, where he began his career as an archaeologist," says the curator, who first came to the museum in 2008 to conduct research. While still a graduate student, she also landed a fellowship at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1999. It eventually turned into a full-time position as an assistant curator in the museum's Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art. She remained at the MET for close to a decade, contributing to exhibitions on ancient Babylon and Mesopotamia. ➤

containing research, excavation records and fieldwork from the entire Near East. It's a critical mass of scholarship that's unmatched anywhere in the world, and one that sets the OI apart from its larger peers.

At a time when major Western museums are under increasing pressure to return artefacts taken during conflict or from former colonies, the OI is also unique for the way in which it acquired its collection. Most of its materials were largely the result of its own expeditions rather than purchases. Today it's one of the few museums in the world whose collection primarily came from authorised archaeological projects, where findings were shared with the host countries. In more recent years, Middle Eastern nations have insisted that major artefacts remain in their borders, and the OI continues to operate within those rules. "It's this reliable provenance that's helped us become a leading centre for the study of the ancient Near East," says Jean, noting that the OI has also contributed to our understanding of the origins of human civilisations.

"Whether we're talking about the early establishment of cities or the beginnings of food production, all of these developments occurred in the region we now call the Middle East," adds the curator, whose love of the region began with the Arab and Persian friends she made while an undergraduate student at Boston University. Her growing interest in the Middle East would lead her to pursue a PhD in Art History and Archaeology from New York University in 2005. While there, she studied under Donald P. Hansen, a leading archaeologist who had worked on digs in Iraq since the 1950s.

"He became my mentor and got me interested in the ancient Middle East," says Jean, who also served as his assistant, carefully organising his slides, photographs and field records from numerous digs over the decades. Beginning in 1999, he took Jean on her first trips to the region, where they worked on important excavations at the ancient site of Tell Brak in northeastern Syria. "I have very fond memories of Syria, where we stayed for two months at a time. I used it as an opportunity to visit well-known archaeological sites around the country, as well as cities such as Damascus, Aleppo, Hama and Homs," says the archaeologist, who worked on digs at other important Syrian sites such as Tell Mozan, Hamoukar and Tell Zeidan.

Jean's relationship with the OI began long before she came on-board as the museum's chief curator and deputy director. After her professor and mentor passed away in 2007, she participated in a project to publish the



Jean, in an emerald gown by Katrin Schnabl, stands in the OI's Mesopotamian Gallery beneath a colossal human-headed winged bull excavated in Iraq

“While I was there, I worked on major shows where we’d have 52 lenders from 17 different countries. That experience prepared me for my role at the OI today,” says Jean, who sees the museum’s centennial as an opportunity to engage with new and diverse audiences. To make her point, she heads towards its exhibition galleries, which are undergoing a multi-million-dollar renovation. Her first stop is the Egyptian Gallery, where a 17-foot tall statue of King Tutankhamun looms over the refurbished space. Like many of the ancient Egyptian artefacts on view, this particular statue was excavated by the OI at Luxor in 1930.

“Egypt was an early focus of the OI, because its founder was the first American to receive a degree in Egyptology,” says the curator, while looking at an image of Chicago House, an outpost of the OI in Luxor. Established in 1924, its complex of buildings sits along the bank of the Nile, where it has served as a base for generations of scholars. “It goes back to an era when the OI sent out large expeditions for months at a time, but also demonstrates our commitment to the countries we work in,” she says, while adding that the OI once maintained similar headquarters at archaeological sites across the Middle East.

“What’s extraordinary about Chicago House in Luxor is that it continues to grow today, while serving scholars and archaeologists working on digs and managing the conservation of nearby sites,” says Jean, as she points out highlights in the Egyptian Gallery that include the brightly painted coffin of a temple singer, as well as a written account of the first labour strike in history from around 1182 BC. “Since we reside on a university campus, it’s also important for us to engage with our students,” says the curator, noting that the artefacts on display don’t simply speak to a distant past, but convey universal narratives that still resonate today.

“We’re ultimately telling human stories that transcend time and geography. Whether you’re studying economics or religion, these artefacts point to people dealing with similar issues thousands of years ago,” says Jean, as she enters the Mesopotamian Gallery, whose centrepiece is a colossal winged bull with a human head dating from 721-705 BC. The 40-tonne, 16-foot tall sculpture was excavated by the OI at Khorsabad in northern Iraq from 1928-29. Today the museum is home to one of the most comprehensive displays of ancient Mesopotamian art outside of Baghdad. “The university’s first archaeological excavations in Iraq were conducted in 1903, and pre-date the founding of the OI,” says the curator, as she walks past a spectacular relief from the palace of King Sargon II of Assyria dating from 721-705 BC.

When asked to share her favourite items on display, she turns to smaller objects used by people on a daily basis. They include a 4000-year-old grooming kit, a clay boat marked with fingerprints from 2350 BC, as well as cosmetic pigments housed in shell containers. “The history of Mesopotamia tends to be told from a bird’s-eye view, emphasising larger events that impacted entire societies. Yet these quotidian objects not only speak volumes about living in antiquity, but are relatable to us today,” observes Jean, who’s preparing to travel to the ancient site of Nippur in southern Iraq. The OI first began excavating there in 1948 and remained until work came to a halt during the first Gulf War in 1990.

“We’ve been waiting for the right time to resume excavations in Iraq. I hope it’s the beginning of a new chapter and I’m looking forward to working with our Iraqi colleagues,” says the curator, who will also travel to the University of Kufa to participate in a conference on Mesopotamian archaeology and site conservation. Organised in conjunction with the OI and the universities of Oxford, Cambridge and Pennsylvania, it will address the urgent need to preserve ancient sites that were damaged during recent years of conflict. “For most of us working in the field, it’s difficult to separate ourselves from world events impacting the very sites and artefacts we’re trying to preserve,” says Jean, who sadly recalled the destruction of the ancient city of Palmyra in Syria, a place she’d visited many times before 2011.

Among the reinstalled displays in the OI’s galleries are texts and images that bring attention to the ongoing threat of looting and the importance of preserving cultural heritage sites in turbulent times. “It’s not only important to build awareness around these issues, but to also

demonstrate how we’re addressing these challenges as an institution,” says the curator, noting that many important Mesopotamian artefacts remain in Baghdad. When looters destroyed and damaged the contents of the Iraq Museum, the OI’s staff quickly mobilised to create a centre for crisis management. It set about using its own records from decades of excavations and other resources to help with the re-documentation of the Iraq Museum’s collections.

In the aftermath of the crisis, the OI’s scholars and archaeologists also became frequently quoted figures in the media to bring attention to Iraq’s cultural heritage. In addition, they worked with organisations such as UNESCO to call for an international ban on trading ancient artefacts from the country. “It became a duty for many of the OI’s faculty and staff, who’d worked in Iraq for many years. The contents of the Iraq Museum are part of our shared history because Mesopotamia was the cradle of human civilisation,” says Jean, noting that archaeologists see this kind of activism as part of their job in a rapidly changing world.

The next morning, while supervising the installation of new display cases in the OI’s Persian Gallery, Jean looks up at a monumental bull’s head staring down at her. Excavated at the ancient city of Persepolis in Iran, it’s one of many artefacts uncovered there by the OI’s archaeologists in the 1930s. “This is probably one of the richest collections related to ancient Persia outside of Iran. It tells us about the economy, languages, social structures and institutions of a civilisation that lasted from approximately 550-330 BC,” says the curator, noting that despite interruptions during World War II and the 1979 Revolution, the OI continues to collaborate with Iranian colleagues.

Towards the end of the day, Jean’s eager to show off a new gallery installation inspired by *Cosmopolitan City*, a 2015 exhibition at the museum. It shed light on the multicultural city of Fustat, the capital of medieval Egypt and a predecessor to modern Cairo. Governed by Muslim rulers, the city’s neighbourhoods were populated by a patchwork of religions, languages and ethnic communities. The exhibition examined how they lived together and melded traditions to create a thriving metropolis from the 7th-12th centuries AD. “It was an incredibly successful exhibition, but what’s even more astounding is that only a fraction of the objects had ever been shown in public,” says the curator, who set about creating a permanent display of Islamic artefacts from the museum’s collection.

Out of boxes and drawers in its storage rooms have emerged ceramic plates, textiles, jewellery and architectural fragments. Many of the artefacts were excavated at Fustat by the American archaeologist George Scanlon between 1964-65, and reveal how the boundaries between communities blurred. “Seen together, these objects encourage us to ask questions about tolerance, discrimination, diversity and globalisation,” says Jean, noting that the concept of multiculturalism isn’t a new one. Among the museum’s most striking Islamic treasures, is a fragment of a page from the 1001 Nights. Acquired by the OI in 1947, it’s believed to be the earliest example of the famous tales and one of the oldest existing Arabic literary manuscripts.

“Although we’re known for ancient Mesopotamian and Egyptian artefacts, most people aren’t aware that the OI is also a pioneer in early Islamic archaeology,” says the curator, who’s focused on telling these forgotten histories as well as engaging with audiences from the Middle East and its diaspora. “When an Egyptian student studying in the US or an Iraqi-American looks at these artefacts, they’re going to have a very different relationship to them than myself,” observes Jean, noting that museums can take an inclusive approach to displaying collections that speak to diverse audiences.

The OI’s chief curator is also exploring future collaborations with Middle Eastern artists. “Many of them are responding to cultural heritage issues, the displacement of communities and even the refugee crisis. One shouldn’t be surprised to find these same concerns highlighted alongside the museum’s ancient artefacts,” says the curator, who hopes to create links between the region’s past and present. “It’s important to humanise this history, so that people realise these 5000-year-old objects come from the Middle East of today. A region that has contributed to shaping our world for centuries,” notes Jean, of her vision for a storied institution that’s entering its 100th year. ■

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Jean Evans

STYLING: MELISSA SERRICO KAMHOUT

In the OI’s Persian Gallery, the curator looks up at a monumental bull’s head excavated at Persepolis in the 1930s

